

Jeffrey W. Runge, M.D.
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
“The Highway Safety Challenge”
Tuesday, October 15, 2002
Anchorage, Alaska

First of all, I want to tell you what a pleasure it is to be here with Jim Cudell, and Joe Clapp and Mary Peters. This really is a life-long passion for me. This is what I do, what I decided to do when I was a little boy, and that was to take care of people who were sick or injured. And to be able to do this on a grand scale is truly a life's honor and I will try my best to live up to that.

These two guys in the photo are the guys that Joe, Mary and I work for. I've got to tell you what this fellow on the right there told us at a gathering of Senate-confirmed appointees. He said “you may say you work for me, but you don't; you work for the American people.” And whatever your job is, he told a big group of us, whatever your job is, you need to serve those people to the absolute best of your ability.

The other thing that President Bush told us is that safety and security are his number one priorities, the safety and security of the American people. I can tell you that safety of the American people is my number one priority. Our goals are aligned. Moreover, he is a fellow who has given us all a management agenda, and he believes in results so that as we approach the States, as we approach our partners out there, AASHTO, the Governors' Highway Safety Representatives, and others, we want our goals to be aligned so that we

can realize his management objectives and we can realize our goals for the safety of the American people. We can't do this if we're all going every which way, but to get them aligned is what we need to do, and Secretary Mineta therefore tells us that safety is the number one priority of the Department of Transportation. And, you can believe it; he backs it up with his words.

So, what I want to do today is to talk a bit about the goals of the Department of Transportation with respect to highway safety, the priorities we have set for next year and beyond, and then the very important topic of our Surface Transportation Reauthorization, about which AASHTO members are going to be very, very persuasive and weigh in heavily with Congress. This is not just about cars, it's not just about trucks, or pavement, or guardrails, or rumble strips, or anything else. This is a conjoined effort and we are all in this together; therefore, once again I hope that our goals will be aligned. I am buoyed by the fact that the last AASHTO President and new, incoming President are both committed to safety, and to having safety as a very important plank in their platforms last year and this year.

The AASHTO safety plan included a very ambitious goal: to reduce highway deaths by 5,000 by 2004. Now, that's a lot of people. As Mary has already said, this is a number of 40,000. You've set your goal by reducing that by 5,000 within the next 2 years.

That's an extremely ambitious goal but, in fact, we have a method for helping you get there, because, once again, our goals are aligned. As you can see, there is an undeniable need to work on this issue of traffic crashes. In addition to the over 40,000 people who

are killed every year, there are another 3.3 million who are seriously injured. And I can tell you, I have been on the receiving end and there is nothing that raises one's passion more than walking down the hall to a family room and walking in and talking to a mom, or a mom and a dad, and telling them that their teenager will either not be coming home again, or will be coming home but will change their lives radically forever. Changing the plumbing in the house, converting the stairs into ramps, a teenager who had the highest possible hopes for the future and parents who were looking forward to being empty nesters are now faced with the challenge of caring for a disabled child for the rest of their lives.

This is just one, but there are 3.3 million seriously injured in this country every year. It is one of the leading causes of work lost days for American industry. It's a huge issue, not just in terms of human suffering, but also in terms of economic impact. I can see we're not making a lot of progress here. The number killed shown in this slide has been relatively stable as you can see in the 2000 and 2001 final numbers. If there is any good news here, it's that the vehicle miles traveled went up last year by about two percent, I believe, and it has gone up remarkably the last three decades. Yet, we have been able to keep the number killed fairly constant, that is, if you can call 42,000 dead people each year good news, which I really can't.

We do have one shred of good news here and that is that injury crashes are down. We are seeing a decrease in injuries and we don't really know why, but it looks like about 5%, a 5% decrease in injuries last year. Whether it's crashworthiness of vehicles or people

wearing their safety belts, or whatever. Our statisticians will have to get into this and figure out exactly why. But this is a piece of good news.

I mention the economic impact, and for those of you who really believe in your hearts that wearing safety belts is a personal issue and that we shouldn't even be discussing this, I want to point out some pieces of this pie chart. This shows the cost of motor vehicle crashes in 2000 which Secretary Mineta released last May at a press conference. This is the result of work done by our analysts at NHTSA along with some contractors who are at the very top of the medical economics field, and the part of the pie chart that is at the top here, the biggest part of the pie chart, are injury crashes. You can see productivity, workplace costs, market productivity, medical care. The bottom part of the pie chart shows non-injury related costs, including travel delays and property damage, both of which are huge chunks. Twenty-five million dollars in travel delays, which is what it costs when somebody crashes into another vehicle and commercial entities and so forth are delayed. But, the big number is the overall cost, \$230.6 billion annually. That is a chunk of change.

What I think is really interesting here are the medical costs. Does \$32 billion sound familiar to anybody in this room? That is the medical costs for treating injury for one year, \$32 billion. This is a big deal folks.

We also did an analysis of all of our countermeasures. If we applied different countermeasures, which would result in the most lives saved? This graph shows

predicted lives saved by countermeasure. As you can see here, about a third of lives that could be saved would come from getting our alcohol fatality rate from the current rate of .63 fatalities per hundred million vehicle miles traveled down to .44. Just cutting it off that much would net us more than 30% of the possible lives saved. And raising national seat belt use to 90% would get us another third. The final third represents all other countermeasures combined.

So when we look at different countermeasures, we really do believe that our priorities are set for us when we follow the data. These are the priority issues for next year, and until we get these problems solved, they will continue to be our priority issues – seat belts and impaired driving, along with a third issue, data and traffic record quality. I'll touch on each of these in the next few minutes.

The Secretary did an interesting thing for Joe, Mary and me, and that was that he gave us the same goal. And our goal is no more than 1.0 fatalities per 100 million VMT by 2008. He didn't tell Joe that it was okay just to reduce large truck crashes by 50 percent; he didn't tell Mary Peters to reduce road departure and intersection crashes by a certain amount; he said what counts is the number of people who are dying on our nation's highways. So, we have one goal. Our goals are aligned with the Secretary's, and the Secretary's goals are aligned with the President. And knowing that your goal is to reduce fatalities by 5,000 lives by 2004, they're our goals as well.

But here's the situation people: the 2008 goal. This is where we are today in the year 2002 – 42,116 people dead on our highways. If we simply maintain the current rate of 1.52 per 100 million VMT where we are now, we will see 50,000 fatalities by 2008. Not only will we not get to where we want to go, but we will lose ground if we do not do something about the current rate, to get it down to 1.0. We have got to find 9,000 lives to save in the face of ever-increasing vehicle miles traveled. How are we going to find 9,000 lives?

Cars are very crashworthy; roads are relatively safe but they need improvement, they need to be maintained, and we've come a long way with that. How are we going to find 9,000 lives? Well, there is a way to do it and it's called the safety belt. It's free. It's already in your vehicle; you already paid for it. But the failure to wear seat belts in this country cost us \$26 billion dollars in the year 2000 -- \$26 billion of your pocket change for people who refuse to wear their seat belt. So we revised our goals from a rather non-scientific-based goal that was set in the last Administration to what we really believe that we can do if the States do everything they can, and if we convert 10 percent of the non-belt-users each year.

We had set a seat belt use goal of 78% by the end of 2003. This was set at the end of last year when our national belt use rate was 73%, so we knew that it was challenging but we figured that we absolutely had to do it. How have we been doing over the course of the last 2 decades? Well, in 1983 almost nobody buckled their seat belt. I did, but I think I was the only guy in 1983. I was in my high school class back in the early '70s but as

laws began to pass, boom! It's a funny phenomenon and criminologists and sociologists know this. That is, if you have a good idea, about 10% of the population will do it because it's a good idea. If you pass a law, you'll pick up another 30% because people want to obey the law. If there's no impediment to following the law, they will comply whether or not you enforce it. But the fact is that as you begin to enforce the law, then you have some incremental change.

There's that phenomenon right here. On this slide CIOT stands for Click It Or Ticket. We started to do high-visibility enforcement across the country, and in certain regions we started to see rather dramatic seat belt use increases. Seventy-three percent use is where we were. Then we set our goal at 78%. Our national numbers are just in and they are at 75%. So, we're making progress, but we have to make more progress, and we have to get to 78% by the end of next year. It's doable. Overall use is now at 75%.

Here's the good news. First, let me clarify for those of you who might not know about primary laws. A primary seat belt law means the police are unencumbered from enforcing the law. It's already on the books. If they see a kid bouncing around in the back seat of a car, they can pull it over. If they see an adult not wearing their belt, they can pull the vehicle over, give them a ticket. The fine is very nominal in just about every State in this country, and ranges from \$5 in Idaho to \$270 in the State of Washington. Primary law States as a group made history this year, hitting this milestone of 80% use. We very consistently see a differential of 11 percentage points lower belt use for

secondary law States, those States where a driver cannot be given a ticket unless they are breaking another law first, such as speeding or an illegal turn.

So once again the data point us to where we need to go in this country. This is a map of State seat belt laws. In the green you will see primary laws, the yellow are secondary laws, and the red is New Hampshire. I should point out for the benefit of the New Hampshireites who are here today that New Hampshire does have a primary belt law for children up to age 18, so if you're a kid or teenager in the State of New Hampshire, you have to buckle your seat belt or you can get a ticket. That's their approach, but if we are going to reach this goal soon of saving those lives, we have got to turn more of these yellow States to green.

There is no question about the data; they are perfectly clear. When you pass a law, even with minimal enforcement, you still realize a change. There are some primary law States that don't do much enforcement but still have a reasonable seat belt use. So, I would ask for this to be an action item on your agenda, to get a primary belt law passed in your States, to unfetter your police officers to enforce the law to protect your citizens.

Here are the numbers: if we get belt use to 90%, we will save 6,200 lives, just like that! How are you going to meet your goal of saving 5,000 without it? How am I going to meet my goal of 78% without it? How are Joe, Mary and I going to meet our goal of 1.0 fatalities per hundred million VMT without it? Answer? We can't. There are very few States in this country that can take a secondary law and turn it into more than 80% belt

use. Vermont just did it with a Click It Or Ticket campaign; the State of Washington did it by aggressive enforcement. Most states cannot reach that level with a secondary law. So a primary law is where we need to go.

We know that when we do the Click It Or Ticket campaign, those States that follow the model, which includes high visibility paid media with vigorous enforcement, get a 9 percentage point increase. These are our results from this past May when we did a full-scale analysis of Click It Or Ticket States, non-Click It Or Ticket States who did just a mobilization, and States which did a hybrid in-between.

We have a model that works. For every 1% increase in belt use, we get \$800 million in economic costs saved, 2.8 million more people buckling up, 276 lives saved, and reduce the severity of 6,400 moderate to critical injuries.

Now, priority number two, impaired driving. We have set another goal, to move from .63 to .53 alcohol-related fatalities per one hundred million VMT by 2003. This is a much more difficult issue to get our arms around than belts. Seat belt use is very straightforward. Impaired driving is not so straightforward and what we have seen over the last decade is absolutely no progress in reducing alcohol-related fatalities. We are stuck at right around 17,000 people a year dead from alcohol-related crashes. Actually, 17,448 is the final number for 2001, the majority of whom had blood alcohols that were over the per se limit of .08.

Setting a .08 limit in each State is a countermeasure that has been pushed by Mothers Against Drunk Driving and other constituencies as well as NHTSA, and was part of TEA-21. There was a sanction included in the Appropriations Act of 2001 which talked about .08. But .08 is not a magic bullet. Once again, on this map the green States have enacted a .08 limit, and the yellows are the ones who have yet to pass it. .08 keeps healthy people healthy.

The reason that you see the dramatic difference in BAC distribution between the high alcohol level people and the low alcohol level people is because people who do not have alcohol dependency and who do not need treatment will respond to a lower BAC level. That is in fact what we have seen across the country. But here is where our real problem lies, the area under this curve right here. This is the blood alcohol content for drivers involved in fatal crashes. The vast majority of the area under the curve is over .08. Moving along the curve to .16, let me tell you: at this level you are drinking to get drunk. These are not social indiscretions. This is not a husband and a wife splitting a bottle of wine over a 2-hour meal. These are people who are drinking to get drunk, and in 75% of fatal collisions, their drug of choice is beer.

So, when we follow the data we begin to think about which countermeasure we can apply, but this is very tough to get our arms around, so we have a lot more to do here. You and your States need to strengthen DWI laws and we need to improve blood breath data collection. In so many States out there, when somebody dies in a crash, they just declare him dead and no one does any blood-alcohol testing. We have a mathematical

model that imputes the blood alcohol in these people, but we need more real information. We need uniform State data, and uniform international data so that we are all talking about the same things. And we need training for judges and prosecutors, and treatment for the offenders.

Once again, that area under the curve, the high BAC users, a great many of them are dysfunctional drinkers. Many of them have bona fide alcohol problems that need to be treated medically and we just don't have the resources out there to do that. My own profession needs to do more. If you come to the emergency department and you have an alcohol problem, your chances of getting detected are nearly zero, and yet, you show up at the ED and they take your blood pressure and tell you they detect a little hypertension. That's great, but is it going to kill you – or someone else - tomorrow? Impaired driving can kill you tomorrow and yet we don't do enough to screen because there's a feeling among my profession that even if we find somebody with an alcohol use disorder, there's nothing to do with them. So, at the State level when you talk about medical insurance and how they treat impairment as an issue, that's a drunk driving problem. Law enforcement needs to work more closely with medical professionals so that we can do detection, legal intervention, and better handling of evidence.

A final priority issue for us is data improvement. Everything that we do, all the numbers that you just saw, depend on the quality of your State traffic records. If you are not in touch with the State Bureau of Traffic Records, I would encourage you to go home and to do so. In order to pinpoint problem areas where there are unsafe roads, you must have

accurate traffic records with geographic coding. In order to understand the impaired driving problem, you need alcohol data. You need data from the roadway, from the police reports which are most often handwritten and then transcribed by a typist some months later into our data base which later becomes FARS. FARS is the best census in the world for traffic crashes, and this is what everybody uses for engineering their motor vehicles all the way from designing safety programs to emergency medical services and so forth. Driver licensing is a big issue right now because of the security problem we had with people getting into this country illegally and then obtaining drivers' licenses. We are well aware of the need to integrate these data into State traffic records.

And that's it for me except to say this. AASHTO has always had considerable influence with respect to Reauthorization. We need you to exercise that influence now because I believe that your goals are aligned with our safety goals which are the Secretary's goals and the President's goals. Your Presidents have said this and I think we'll hear more about that at lunchtime. The Secretary is extremely interested in your views about Reauthorization. He has held listening sessions, including a very fine session a couple weeks ago when AASHTO came in and we talked about a lot of these issues. I really felt buoyed and supported by your leadership when they came for this session.

Everything that we do to tackle these big problems comes from Reauthorization. It's a very open process and I hope that you will certainly exercise your citizenship in this country by weighing in on this. I can guarantee you the people with opinions other than yours will be weighing in and I would encourage you to do so as well.

Finally, I would ask you to take a couple action items away from this. Number one, weigh in on Reauthorization. Number two, look at the data in your State. We have State level data that we can give you about your seat belt use, about what it costs your State not to have a primary belt law if you're one of the 32 States that does not have one, and we're quite willing to work with you to help AASHTO meet its goal of 5,000 lives saved as the absolute first step. I would encourage you to support your Governor's Highway Safety Representatives in every State and make sure that some of that flexible funding that comes your way goes their way so they can take care of these very important foibles.

Thank you very much.